

Members of the Appropriations Committee, thank you for this opportunity to testify on SB111. My name is Julie Clark. I live in Clinton, CT and I own and operate CAST Preschool and Childcare Center in Woodbury, CT. which I began in 1989 as a single mother with 2 small children. We opened with an enrollment of 5 children and today we care for and educate approximately 150 children from Woodbury and the surrounding towns. In all of the 30+ years that I have been in business, I have never seen such a dire situation affecting parents, children and caregivers. Early childhood education has always been a "touch and go" business but today it is on the verge of collapse. The early education field has always attracted primarily women with a significant other in their lives that allowed them to work in a field they loved for a ridiculously small salary. Now, however, with the current jobs situation, not only are people opting out of this line of work and choosing higher paying jobs - and let's be clear that a fast food job pays more than a childcare educator can earn - but there are a huge shortage of people interested in pursuing this line of work. To put it briefly and clearly, the early childhood field's greatest challenge now is our inability to hire staff. Due to this staffing shortage, we have been forced to close classrooms or have only one teacher in a classroom that would typically have a Head Teacher and an Assistant. Our Center, which is entirely dependent on private tuition, has a long waiting list, but there is no way we can accommodate families who need childcare without proper staffing.

It is imperative that we stabilize the childcare industry. We need to provide our dedicated teachers and those young people who have ambitions to enter our field with salaries that will afford them a decent income - commensurate with the wages paid to early educators in the public schools. If we lose any more of our teaching staff, going

forward, we will be unable to continue this valuable service that young families - and our economy - depend on. Many childcare businesses have already closed their doors. After 33 years, I am struggling to keep mine open.

It is my understanding that this year we need a 700 million dollar down payment on what should eventually be a 2.5 billion dollar system to enable parents of the 170,000 children under 5 to access free pre-k and high quality, affordable childcare in the setting of their choice. In this system our teachers and the childcare providers all over the State would be paid for the true cost of quality and the immeasurable service they provide.